

## Evangelism and Church Growth in Korea

March  
1983

The cassette tape plays "Lord lift me up on higher ground" as a Christian taxi driver takes us to Seoul airport...an appropriate thought as we take off across the Pacific. At the tip of tiny Piyang-do Island far south of mainland Korea, my wife and I stumble on two young soldiers, part of the constant vigil against North Korean communist infiltrators...both are Christians and welcome our prayer for their safety. I drive our Pinto for repairs at a garage where the shop foreman is a deacon and 18-inch high Korean letters on the wall proclaim, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." At a Gideons International banquet we learn that 15 million Scriptures were distributed last year in a land of 40 million people...more than any country outside the U.S. A half dozen churches are born every day. It's fun to stand in any city and count the churches visible in every direction, or to see how many miles of expressway can be covered with church steeples in sight. Christians multiply 4 times faster than the population growth, and may reach 40% of all Koreans by 2000 A.D.

What's behind all this "alive" Christianity? How did it start? What part have missionaries had in it? What keeps up the momentum? Will it continue? Are there lessons for our American Church in local evangelism and world mission policies? Here are some answers, as we anticipate the 100th birthday of the Korean Church next year, and thank God, saying, "Great is Thy faithfulness!"

It began with valiant pioneer missionaries who travelled amid incredible hardships to explore an unknown land, made their homes among a superstitious and suspicious people, and braved the diseases, the filth, and the formidable task of learning one of the world's most difficult languages. They saw the collapse of the old monarchy, wars on their soil between Japan and China and Japan and Russia, 40 years of Japanese occupation, two world wars, and finally the Korean War with its terrible slaughter, mass migration of refugees, and division of the nation. At no time during that entire century has there been a peaceful transition of government.

In a period of poverty, persecution, and peril there was astonishing church growth. Why?

- 1 Missionaries practiced an evangelism defined as proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ as Saviour from sin and Lord of life, bringing all who accepted Him into the fellowship of His Church, and training them in the meaning and practice of the new life in Christ. Education and medicine were never ends in themselves but always a part of this philosophy of mission.
- 2 In the 1890's, the 4 cooperating overseas missions agreed upon (and thereafter firmly adhered to) basic policies which laid the foundation of an independent Korean Church fully controlling her own affairs and put her almost a century ahead of the times ecclesiastically.
- 3 Every Christian was taught the centrality and authority of the Word of God, and a vast comprehensive system of Bible study was instituted and required of all church officers and leaders.
- 4 In an era when old religious and political structures were dying, the missionary brought hope and stability as he identified with the Koreans in their struggles for freedom.
- 5 Most significant of all, the Holy Spirit created a peculiarly resilient and energetic type of Christians, whose natural stubbornness thrived under persecution, whose near-fanatic devotion to leaders was transferred to Jesus Christ as Lord, and whose drive to succeed compelled them to full time witness to their new-found Saviour in an effort to establish His kingdom over all rivals.

This momentum of church-growth continues today. New converts are won primarily through "friendship evangelism" as each Christian invites friends to church, or a woman brings her family to Christ, or a student wins his classmates. This is reinforced in all denominations through a cellular system of "neighborhood prayer-meetings" on Friday evenings. If there are thousands of churches in Korea, there are tens of thousands of such informal gatherings to which non-Christian neighbors will often accept invitations, and find Christ through a friendly welcome and exposure to the joy of people who sing and pray and share the blessings of God's Word. A regular feature of Sunday morning worship is to introduce new members along with the persons who brought them to church and to welcome them with hand-clapping by the congregation and a prayer by the pastor.

It is amazing how young people are attracted to Christ and swarm into Saturday night meetings for worship and Bible Study. You won't see many teenagers at Sunday 11:00 A.M. worship...that's because they have had their own earlier service, largely run by themselves and often with attendance rivalling the adult service. This interest carries over into the armed forces where 600,000 young men are pastored by splendid Christian chaplains in every unit and where hundreds accept Christ and where the percentage of Christians often exceeds that of the civilian population.

The Christian movement in Korea has always emphasized rural church development. After establishing an initial strong church as a base of operation in each leading city and turning over local evangelism to it, early missionaries used the bitter cold winter months for leadership training and the rest of the year itinerated widely to evangelize the heavily populated rural areas where today thousands of churches are their living memorials. Missionary evangelists and their Korean associates still labor in mountain areas and along the rugged coasts to fill in the gaps. A small organization named "Operation Lighthouse" is one of the most effective programs of church planning with well-defined goals to light the lamps along the southern shores.

The past 3 decades have seen a population shift from two-thirds rural to two-thirds urban, and that population has doubled. With this vast influx into the cities urban churches see fantastic growth with thousands in attendance at multiple Sunday services. Busy city streets are lined with 2nd floor rented halls transformed into worship space where in a year or so congregations form, organized, and move out to build their own churches. City pastors scramble to sign up Christians pouring into their neighborhoods from the country side, while rural evangelists struggle to win at least 25% new converts a year to replace those they have contributed to city churches.

But all is not gold that glitters. Of Korea's 7 million Protestants, two-thirds are Presbyterian divided into 4 major and several dozen minor denominations. Factionalism is rampant. There is a strong drift away from the church by the rural youth thronging to the cities. There are financial and marital scandals, even among the leadership. Strange theologies from abroad and indigenous movements such as the "Moonies" lead many astray. Age old shamism is carried over into faith-healing movements whose leaders sometimes amass fortunes with dubious results among their adherent. The missionary shares in agonizing over these problems with his Korean brethren. Due to population growth, there are far more non-Christians in Korea today than a century ago, thousands of villages still have no local Christian witness, and in places Buddhism and all kinds of superstition still offer strong resistance. The job for the missionary and the Korean Christian is not yet finished!

Yet the Korean Church demonstrates to the world that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Furthermore God has arranged a moment in history when the Christians of Korea may join the forefront in world-wide evangelism. They are among the world's most enthusiastic tourists. 100,000 Koreans labor abroad, largely in the near-East oil lands in construction. They gather for Christian worship which even Moslem restrictions cannot prevent. The fastest growing segment of the American church is among Koreans gathered in more than 1000 congregations. Their missionaries abroad number over 300 in 37 countries not counting Canada and the U.S.

We can thank God and be proud of the strong, independent and aggressive Korean church, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ at the end of one of the greatest centuries in the history of missionary effort. God grant that with continued numerical growth there may also be depth of understanding of God's Word and His way of life. May we in America learn from that church which has so much to teach us in how a church can grow. May we profit from the successes and failures of missionary methods there as we formulate policies for our day to make Christ known and loved and honored among the more than 2 billion in our world who are still beyond the range of effective evangelism by any existing churches.

*and greater outreach in world-wide witness!*